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Qin Shao, *Culturing Modernity: The Nantong Model, 1890-1930.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004. xvii + 351 pp.

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By the early 1920s, the county of Nantong 南通 had become a showpiece for what Chinese could accomplish in terms of industry and education. How this happened in a previously insignificant place is the story, with Zhang Jian 張謇 at its center, recounted in this book. Qin Shao also shows that Nantong was the product of assiduous public relations work: and that indeed the "myth" of Nantong was simultaneously a major part of what made it important. In the terminology of the day, it was a "model" (模範) that other Chinese came to learn from. As Shao points out, Shanghai had claims to more thorough-going modernity, but it was not clear to progressive-minded leaders of counties and towns all around China that they could, or even should, learn from Shanghai with its massive urban projects and social disorder. The smaller scale of Nantong, with factories of at most a few thousand workers and emphasis on order, seemed to offer a recipe for success that might be practically realized in comparable places. Nantong was not the only such model of the Republican or Maoist periods, but it was perhaps unique in being created entirely by local elites, above all the Zhang family, who used its model status to protect Nantong from central government and warlord predations and turn it into a money-making

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tourist venture in its own right.

This well written study adds to our knowledge of Chinese modernity, urbanism, and the politics of the late Qing and early Republic. However, although Shao argues that a study of Nantong can fill the scholarly gap between our research on the great cities like Shanghai on the one hand and rural China on the other, since she in fact shows how unique Nantong was, I doubt we can generalize in this way from this particular town. The book's considerable merits lie elsewhere. It offers a fresh view of the complex character of Zhang Jian (1853-1926); details the rise and fall of Nantong as a model; and brings alive the town and its environs through rich physical descriptions of buildings, roads, sports facilities, and other concrete details.[1] Shao also concludes the book with a remarkable chapter analyzing how the "memory" of Zhang Jian and Nantong has been maintained and reworked in the Maoist and post-Maoist periods, not least by Zhang's direct heirs.

Nantong was long a center of cotton production, open to trade along both the Yangzi River and the Yellow Sea, but prone to flooding and relatively isolated. Shao traces its remarkable modern growth through three stages. From a peasant family, Zhang Jian had finally achieved his *jinshi* degree in 1894 at the age of 41. Then, just as he was building a possibly great career at court, his father died and he had to return home for three years of mourning. Shao points out that Zhang's later self-mythologizing turned this decision into an early commitment to purely local development for which there is little evidence; it is true, however, that Zhang was to

1 As Shao herself generously remarks, her book does not displace the still-useful biography of Zhang: Samuel C. Chu, *Reformer in Modern China: Chang Chien, 1853-1926* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965). Also a work published evidently too late for consideration by Shao should be mentioned. Elizabeth Köll's *From Cotton Mill to Business Empire: The Emergence of Regional Enterprises in Modern China* (Cambridge: MA: HUAC, Harvard University Press, 2004) concentrates on Zhang's textile enterprises from the perspectives of business and economic history but has much to say about Nantong as well.

become disillusioned with the reform efforts of both the later Qing court and the early Republican administrators. Meanwhile, in 1895 the great statesman Zhang Zhidong 張之洞 in effect commissioned Zhang Jian to build Nantong's first mill, the Dasheng Cotton Mill 大生紗廠, which was to become the core of his far-flung business and philanthropic empire. Though protected by Zhang Zhidong and other Qing leaders, it seems fair to say that Nantong's accomplishments were Zhang Jian's accomplishments. The Dasheng Cotton Mill was highly successful, soon begetting more mills, land reclamation and flood prevention projects, and then new schools and even charitable organizations. The mill was specifically the core of a business enterprise legally owned by shareholders but kept under Zhang's personal control, even though his family's direct holdings were under seven percent. The first stage of Nantong's transformation, 1895-1903, thus remained limited to sporadic local reforms.

In the second period (1903-1914), however, the Qing's New Policy (新政) reforms encouraged "local self-government," and Zhang and his brother were able to build a new power structure in Nantong as they pursued modernization projects. They rode out the 1911 Revolution much, perhaps, like other local elites, and seemed happy enough to convert from monarchism to republicanism.[2] What mattered most to them at this particular juncture (and later, as it was to turn out) was Nantong. They built no less than nine new factories, hundreds of schools, and completed extensive land reclamation. In the third period following the revolution of 1911, feeling threatened by Yuan Shikai's 袁世凱 attacks on local self-government, the Zhangs deliberately turned Nantong into a nationally and even internationally known

2 For the professionalization of local "managerial elites" in the late Qing, see Mary Backus Rankin, *Elite Activism and Political Transformation in China: Zhejiang Province, 1865-1911* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986); also Philip A. Kuhn, *Origins of the Modern Chinese State* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

"model" to protect their autonomy (1914-1921).[3] It was during this period that the town's old walls were knocked down and new urban areas built up; roads were paved and electric streetlights put in; an entire school system spread over the county topped by a prestigious normal school in Nantong; a hotel, opera house and museum were built: Nantong not only became modern but was seen to be modern. It was seen by numerous Chinese dignitaries invited by Zhang or self-invited, including Liang Qichao 梁啓超, Huang Yanpei 黃炎培, and Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳 (who became Zhang's friend and performed in Nantong), and even by John Dewey. However, the cotton enterprise suffered from mismanagement and corruption, over-expansion, floods, and a newly competitive international business environment, and decline set in by 1922. Modernization projects suffered from lack of funds, and Nantong's reputation as a model did not survive Zhang Jian's death in 1926.

This chronology must be kept in mind, but Shao organizes her book around thematic issues raised by the notion of "model" rather than following a rise-and-fall narrative. She first discusses the "myth and reality" of Nantong; then its ordering of "space and time"; then the Zhangs' interest in publishing enterprises, which included in effect Nantong's self-advertising; and finally the notion of "display" (the museum, schools and sports, and the theater). The book's penultimate chapter then outlines Nantong's decline in the tumultuous events of the 1920s. The May Thirtieth Movement in particular allowed both the Communists and the Nationalists to infiltrate Zhang's beloved schools and factories, and the Nationalists were able to take effective control of Nantong by 1928. The final chapter, with its emphasis on memory, seems to me to suggest that while Zhang Jian and Nantong could be revived to meet the

3 A minor puzzle: in several places Shao claims that Zhang sought to make Nantong "a self-sufficient unit" and perhaps achieved this goal, at least to a degree (e.g., p. 33), but of course if Nantong could resist outside pressures better than could many places, it relied on exports of products and imports of capital and was scarcely self-sufficient.

needs of Dengist modernization in the 1980s, they now represent a lost world.

In the rest of this review, I will offer no further description of the book's many riches but try to deal with the larger issues Shao raises.[4] She considers Nantong to have been "a socially engineered *simulation* of modernity.... 'exhibitory modernity'" (p. 5; emphasis in the original). "Simulation" can refer simply to "imitation," and certainly Zhang Jian sought to imitate in Nantong the things he saw in Japan, Shanghai, and what he knew of the West (Zhang was to import many overseas-trained experts). But "simulation" also implies counterfeiting, as if there something about Nantong's modernity was not authentic. It is not entirely clear how Shao defines Nantong's modernity. Was some necessary ingredient still missing from all the factories, schools, and electric lines? Did Nantong's economic decline and failure as a model by the late 1920s also mark the failure of its would-be modernity? In focusing on the deliberate displays of Nantong and on Zhang's personal myth-making, Shao at first seemed to me to be implying that Nantong's modernity was not authentic but smacked of a Potemkin village. Yet at the same time, she regards display itself as a sign of modernity; for Shao, then, modernity is not reducible to modernizing policies but also "about presentation....a fashion that required validation—to be modern is to be seen, judged, consumed, and thus legitimized as modern by the public" (p. 6). In this sense, Nantong would seem to have been fully modern; "culturing modernity" is a nice pun: it captures the sense of modernity as a matter of

4 Yet I cannot resist mentioning a few revealing vignettes Shao tells: the visiting dignitaries who tried to poach Nantong's skilled managers and workers with promises of higher salaries; the worker who was fired from the factory for being one minute late; the prestige distinguished that visitors lent to Nantong but in turn the prestige that bringing home a sample of Zhang Jian's calligraphy brought to favored visitors; the fascinating story of Nantong's museum. The museum, built after the Qing court ignored Zhang's recommendation that a national "imperial museum" like Japan's could improve the cultural level of the people, was devoted to natural history, the arts, and even active research, but it was essentially closed to the public lest their rude behavior injure the specimens or ruin the atmosphere for more distinguished guests.

culture as well as Zhang Jian's desire to encourage its growth in the petri dish of Nantong.

Yet I wonder if modernity can be made to reproduce like bacteria and, indeed, exactly what Zhang and the other citizens of Nantong thought of the developmental stage—or process? historical moment? teleology?—that we now call modernity. Perhaps this is Shao's worry: that an artificially (?) cultured modernity is not quite the same thing as a bottom-up organic (?) growth. There are certainly differences, but in my view the problem of authenticity recedes when we understand modernity as intrinsically a global phenomenon resulting from the largely imperialist expansion of capitalism in the nineteenth century, which provoked and constrained a variety of local responses. This is not to imagine a simple dialectic of "impact and "response" or even "global and local" that privileges a unitary and universal teleology of modernity but rather to understand modernity "as a loose and yet over-determined conceptual framework deriving from and simultaneously informing a particular Chinese experience of a diverse global historical process, an experience through which new problems were raised and old problems were rethought in creative, inventive, and contradictory ways."[5]

Zhang was himself, as Shao notes, in many ways a conservative man. She argues that he had thoroughly adopted the identity of the scholar and disdained mere merchants. From a non-elite background himself, he needed to present himself as a Confucian paragon: honest, self-sacrificing, and devoted to the public good. In fact, he took profits from the mills and poured them into educational as well as infrastructural "investments"—which worked as long as there were enough profits to share with the other stockholders. He also lived well, building a number of villas

5 Rebecca E. Karl and Peter Zarrow, "Introduction," in Karl and Zarrow, eds., *Rethinking the 1898 Reform Period: Political and Cultural Change in Late Qing China* (Cambridge, MA: HUAC, Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 10.

and keeping concubines; he treated what were theoretically limited-liability corporations as his personal property. Indeed, if one side of Zhang's character was "forward-looking and experimental, his arbitrary side was self-serving, turning new cultural inventions into personal possessions and to an extent suffocating them" (p. 196). Zhang's concern with Nantong's image was equally ambiguous. Was it about providing other local leaders a useful model for modernization so that the whole country eventually would be strengthened? Or was it a clever way to attract ever-needed cash investments? Similarly, Shao finds that Nantong's schools were expected to produce new citizens—but were also "meant to turn out just the kind of disciplined, hardworking, and public-minded people who were necessary for local development" and Zhang's private business interests (p. 162).

Politically, it seems easier to say what Zhang opposed than what he supported, at least outside of the modernization of Nantong and "village-ism" (村落主義). He condemned the radical ideas of the May Fourth Movement of the early 1920s and more or less successfully suppressed any student action, at least until the May Thirtieth movement of 1925. (Here, it would be useful to learn more precisely how Zhang suppressed the nascent student movement in Nantong and silenced dissent.) Zhang's village-ism held little appeal in an age of emotional nationalism. Yet when he told students to go back to classes, his pessimism over the central government and their anger with it seem to me to have something in common. Zhang asked, "If the government remains corrupt forever and diplomacy fails forever, can you hold a strike forever?" (p. 231). This is not the optimistic gradualism of a Hu Shi 胡適 (whom Shao never mentions as having visited Nantong) but a profound cynicism; the difference between Zhang and the students lay of course in how they would answer the question, not in its premise.

Yet notwithstanding his conservatism, Shao asserts that "Zhang Jian created an

image of a leader of a totally different stripe from any that China had ever seen before. Combining action and contemplation, he seemed to hold the key to modernizing China and catching up with the modern advanced nations. The Nantong story thus became a moral statement…" (pp. 53-54). This seems about right, at least as a reflection of Zhang's *image*. In fact, the effort to combine thought and action had a Confucian pedigree traceable at least back to Wang Yangming 王陽明, perhaps influencing Zhang through the Meiji heroes. It also seems to me that Zhang's paternalistic attitude toward the whole of Nantong echoed the attitude of other local leaders of the period. As Shao shows, it was Zhang's great public relations success that really set him, and Nantong, apart. Ironically, if Nantong seemed something of an oasis of modernity surrounded by the desert of traditionalism, which may have led Shao to see its mirage-like aspects as a "simulation," she also points out that its success depended on new national flows of information and transportation. In other words, Zhang found a market for the image of Nantong. And if the model of Nantong met a certain need or desire in the China of the early 1900s, such was simply no longer the case in the 1920s. Any explanation of Nantong's decline must therefore go beyond economic factors and even his son's political misadventures, which became fodder for the scandal industry of the day. As Shao remarked, "the Nantong model was successful in its own time, but it did not last" (p. 240) nor could it. Models meet the needs of their own times, and time in twentieth-century China was moving quickly.

In the final chapter, Shao recounts some of the complex ways Zhang has been remembered. There was little time for remembrance through the years of war, but with the restoration of peace in the early Maoist period, Zhang was generally well treated as a "national capitalist," though occasionally attacked as a "bureaucratic capitalist." Yet while Shao thinks locals remembered him with some pride, Zhang

and Nantong were simply not a significant element of national memory work. He was more thoroughly attacked during the 1957 anti-rightist campaign and the Cultural Revolution (Red Guards even destroying his tomb, though the military in Nantong, as elsewhere, preserved most of the local archives). In the early post-Maoist years, Nantong's leaders gingerly began to rehabilitate Zhang, finding a useful quote whereby Mao himself was said to have praised Zhang's contributions to China's industrialization. During the heyday of Dengist reformism, then, Zhang was turned into a symbol of what we might call quasi-capitalist modernization. Although Shao does not say so explicitly, it also seems to me that his emphasis on schools and raising the level of the people (especially supposedly backward peasants) made a nice fit with Dengism as well. Nantong's leaders sought to put the town back on China's cultural map and bring in tourist dollars with conferences and a new textile museum. The highly successful political career of Zhang's grandson under Deng also gave local leaders key support from higher officials. As always, forgetting was part of the process as well: so for all the writing and reminiscences about Zhang, somehow his opposition to the progressive ideas of the 1920s and his intense localism were seldom mentioned. And today it seems that if Nantong served as an exciting "model" for the 1910s and Zhang rehabilitated for the 1980s and '90s, Nantong may again recede back into mere history in the twenty-first century. There is a lot of competition for the attention of investors, tourists, and historians alike in the lower Yangzi region.

Shao's work is an important contribution to ongoing debates about Chinese modernity and offers a case study adding to our knowledge of changing state-society relations, the "May Fourth narrative," economic development, and the national circulation of ideas and personnel. Given the myth-making that surrounded Nantong, Shao's task was not easy, its very difficulty leading her to conclude: "In the case of the Nantong story, the lack of competing interpretations indeed indicates

the success of a hegemonic power in constructing an indisputable narrative. This power derived from the political authority, social status, and financial strength of the Zhang brothers and local elites…" (pp. 282-283). Shao's deconstructionist approach has created even more interesting and historically significant Nantong.